

Ordeal April 11

In January, *History Today* marked the 50th anniversary of the loss of the USS *Pueblo* to North Korea; the ship was conducting activities for the Naval Security Group along the coast of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), when it was confronted with overwhelming force and captured by the North Koreans. The ship was taken to Wonsan Harbor, where its classified material, documents, and equipment fell into enemy hands.

The *Pueblo* had no means of defending itself. In the North Korean confrontation, several crew members were wounded, and one was killed trying to toss a bag of classified documents overboard.

Today, we will focus on the fate of the crew during its captivity in North Korea. *History Today* will have additional articles in the coming months about the crew and the aftermath of the tragic incident.

After the *Pueblo* reached Wonsan Harbor, the crew was blindfolded and their hands tied in front of them with fishing lines. A loud voice told them, "You have violated the laws of our country, and you will be punished." They were prodded with bayonets and struck with rifle butts by their guards, who also punched and kicked them. A crowd of onlookers threw rocks and spit on them, all the while yelling "KILL YANKEE." One of the wounded was carried on a stretcher, but he was dropped frequently. Each time he was dropped he moaned, and each time he moaned, the stretcher bearers punched him.

The crew was hustled onto two buses and forced to sit in a penitent's position. Any movement, including trying to restore circulation to their fingers, brought painful punishment. When a North Korean said they were likely to be shot as spies, Lieutenant Commander Lloyd Bucher, the *Pueblo's* captain, cited the Geneva Convention about prisoners of war. The North Korean responded that, as the two countries were not at war, the treaty on prisoners did not apply.



(Actually, the United States and the DPRK *were* legally at war, since the Korean War of 1950-1953 had been settled by an armistice, not a peace treaty.)

The crewmembers were housed in a dilapidated structure they nicknamed “the barn.” One of the *Pueblo* officers later wrote that “By American standards, our one room apartment for four should have had a ‘condemned’ sign nailed to the door.” The building looked as if it had been hastily converted from some kind of dormitory to a jail, leading analysts later to cite it as evidence that the *Pueblo* capture had not been planned in advance.

The North Koreans also were anxious to collect evidence of spying, perhaps to defend themselves against charges of piracy. The first evening they gave Bucher a confession about spying to sign; the document admitted to spying for the CIA, mentioned the heroic North Korean military, and expressed repentance. When he refused, they bounced him off the walls of his room until he was unconscious. When he regained consciousness, they put a pistol to his head and ordered him to sign or be shot. When he refused, they pulled the trigger on an empty chamber. This was repeated twice. When Bucher still refused to sign, they again beat him into unconsciousness.

After he regained consciousness, the guards took him to another building where they showed him a man they said was a South Korean spy. The man was still living, but his body was terribly mutilated; this demonstrated to Bucher what his captors were capable of. His guard then said that unless Bucher signed a confession, his men would be shot in front of him, one by one, starting with the youngest. The guards won. Bucher signed several documents placed in front of him, then copied one out in his own handwriting and signed it.

The North Koreans did similar things to the other *Pueblo* officers. They resisted at first, but eventually gave the enemy what it wanted. As Edward Murphy later said, “I chose death, but quickly learned that the [North Koreans] were going to

make me just wish I was dead.” His experience and attitude was shared by all the officers.

Next came the enlisted men. They were given biographical forms to fill out. Some put only name, rank, and serial number on them, and were severely beaten until they were more forthcoming. Some filled out the entire form with falsehoods, but found out the North Koreans had their personnel records from the ship, and they were beaten for their attempts to deceive. One Marine sergeant, known as a tough man, is credited with holding out the longest, but his face and body were unrecognizable when he rejoined his roommates after his questioning.

Under interrogation, the men revealed classified information about their work, both on the *Pueblo* and in assignments prior to this mission.

After the first few weeks, captivity settled into a dull prison routine. The guards distributed toothpaste, soap, and reading material (DPRK propaganda). Apparently the guards had wide latitude to administer beatings, and they did so for whatever they considered an infraction of the rules, however slight. The crewmembers also believed the guards often beat them simply for amusement.

In March, the crewmembers were moved to another building, close to the DPRK capital of Pyongyang. Here they were allowed outdoor exercise. They could play volleyball, football, or basketball, but not baseball. Their former Japanese conquerors had forced Koreans to learn the game before World War II, and it had unpleasant associations for the North Koreans.

The North Koreans filmed them at sports and also put them on display in live press conferences to show the world how well they were being treated.

Despite the high risks, Bucher and the crewmembers undertook subtle acts of resistance. The crewmembers’ rooms were decorated with rubber tree plants that the guards said were a symbol of the North Korean leader’s benevolence. The crewmembers slowly killed each of the trees. They would react to orders given in English by odd actions, which they blamed on not understanding the accent; for example, when given a command to turn left while marching down a

corridor, the crewmembers would bump into the walls. In a letter home, one crewmember told his wife the North Koreans were the finest people he had encountered since a visit to St. Elizabeth's (a mental institution in Washington, D.C.).

At one of the propaganda press conferences, one crewmember promised that if allowed to return home he would never commit such a "naughty crime" again. When told to write a letter to a public official, one crewmember addressed it to General Barney Google. (Barney Google was an American comic strip character introduced in 1919 and still well-known in the 1960s.)

None of these acts of resistance did anything to ease the dire circumstances under which they were kept, but it did allow the crewmembers to feel they could retain a certain measure of resistance. This effect on morale was crucial.

In the near future, *History Today* will report on the most dangerous and most famous act of resistance by the crewmembers.

SOURCES: Mitchell Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident*;
Lloyd Bucher, *My Story*.

508 CAPTION: Commander Bucher signing a coerced confession.